PERSPECTIVES ON COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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Abstract

The main objective of this dissertation was to provide researchers interested in the history and evolution of “comparative literature” with a collection of references delineating the evolution of the concept and the development of academic departments dedicated to its study.

The paper includes a first section describing the main issues contributing to the “identity crisis” with which studies and departments defining themselves as “comparative” were consistently confronted ever since the term was coined.

The “preliminary concepts” section offers an overview of the elements that usually confer a “comparative” quality to a literary study, such as interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism, together with a few relevant definitions (in chronological order) describing the commonly accepted meaning of the term at a particular point in time.

The next chapter, “chronological overview”, continues the analysis with additional details, references and comments also in chronological order, dividing the matter in sub-chapters dedicated to as many historical periods, from the Antiquity until the mid-20th century. A separate section, offers a review of the most important institutions

and publications contributing to the development of the comparative field.

The last chapter is a sketch of the current status of the concept and of the institutions dedicated to its study.

The research for the present dissertation focused primarily on facts and documents from the European and North American continents. Its main purpose is not to arbitrate the multitude of trends and opinions trying to associate the term with a singular meaning. It merely attempts to provide the reader with a systematic perspective of the subject matter.

Argument

The term comparative literature generally provokes emotion. The dilettante greets it effusively. A study with so ample a descriptive title will provide him, he expects, with a short and easy road to an appreciative understanding of all the important modern literatures. The scholar is likely to regard the term with severe disapproval. He suspects that the profession of an interest in comparative literature is a form of intellectual presumption; and he believes the peculiar virtues claimed for its methods and its aims to be identical with those inherent in all scientific studies of literature.

The above lines could find easily their place in any recent article published – for instance - in *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*, reflecting the current status of what is maybe the most "embattled approach and discipline of the study of literature.[1]" Yet, they were written at a much earlier date, in 1926, when this emerging domain was seeking not only a framework of its own (a process still in action today) but also general recognition. Their author,

[1] Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, in the *Introduction* to "Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice" Paris: Honoré Champion, editor, 1999.

Oscar James Campbell, was among the firsts to establish a long succession of scholars who attempted to answer a question remaining the brainteaser for many a researcher in contemporary literary studies: *"What is Comparative Literature?"* At the time, the concept evoked a tradition introduced by a series of writings dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, opening the perspective of a vast, unexplored area where "The harvest truly was plenteous, but the laborers were yet few.[2]" Like every other branch of human knowledge, Comparative Literature underwent continual shifts and changes during its development from its early stages to its present form, in concordance with the knowledge and cultural norms of the times. However, the discipline always seemed to be confronted with "identity crises" leading its prospects in blind alleys in a larger number of occasions, if compared with the related, "traditional" areas. At the turn of the century, scholars like Posnett or Texte warned their lecturers about the necessity of a well-defined methodological frame to validate comparatist studies. The response to this demand materialized in a plethora of

[2] Hutchenson Macaulay Posnett, in *Comparative Literature*, New York: D. Appleton and company, 1886, p. VII.

articles trying to offer possible solutions to the problem. However, they lacked unity, and analysts like Paul van Tieghem were complaining a few decades later about “the overwhelming variety of the publications claiming their belonging to the field.” Post-war overviews started to speak about “crises” because of similar reasons, and most of the contemporary studies agree about the need of a comprehensive reconsideration and re-definition of the fundamental principles underlying what is called today “comparative literature.”

This peculiar and unfortunate *status quo* seems to be emerging from several causes, but the most important is probably the extraordinary versatility of the domain. Conceived as an interdisciplinary field since its very beginnings, “comparative literature” evolved from an initial philological and historicist enterprise involving vast bibliographical knowledge to an omnium-gatherum for every study expanding outside the limits of a statutory humanities program - becoming eventually a place accommodating everything unfit for one of the “classic” areas of study: history, national literature, philosophy, etc.

Various trends and scholarly organizations whose marginal status prevented them from being included in the

mainstream of a national literature and/or a traditional humanities program persistently reclaimed it – to a greater or lesser benefit for them and for the discipline. It is not uncommon for a “CompLit” course to be offered under the auspices of a program in theatrical studies or listed as a requirement for a degree in social sciences – and this kind of “identity displacement” concerns only the rather mundane aspect of academic administration, leaving aside any discussion of general theoretical principles. On the ideological level, domains as “women's and gender studies” or “cultural studies” constantly challenge and/or append the “classic” acceptation of the subject: the concomitant study of works belonging to two or more national literatures. As a general rule, the area of study is affiliated either with the department of English, either with one or more foreign language departments, and the professors teaching courses in comparative literature are often “borrowed” from the respective chairs. Naturally, the approaches and the references used in those courses are essentially tributary to the traditions and methods particular to one culture or another. Recurring attempts tried to circumscribe a proprietary “subject matter” and to

implement some of the “lacking methodology[3]” specific to our field of study. However, not even scholars “officially” specialized in comparative approaches are always willing to agree on these points. The debate remains open and different views allowing the domain for instance, to expand, its subject matter beyond purely “literary” objects of study or to focus on the same objects as products of a national spirit depends mostly on academic traditions well identifiable with a time, a place, and very often with a name.

In the meantime, despite its controversial nature, the phenomenon continues to evolve. As Robert J. Clements remarks, “It is a fact of life that the often maligned term “comparative literature” is here to stay and we must live with it. Indeed it has achieved a rank of distinction in many quarters – in the titles of many important literary journals and books, a plethora of articles on every continent, and most college catalogs.[4]” The multitude of

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[3] Prerequisites for an acceptable “study” mentioned by Rene Wellek in *The Crisis of Comparative Literature*, (Concepts of Criticism, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963.)

[4] Robert J. Clements, in *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline.* New York: The modern Language Association of America, 1978, p. 11.

publications and texts grouped under the generic denomination of “comparative literature” has definitely reached a point where it cannot be ignored, and if its complete, theoretical, and methodological systematization seems to be impossible yet, its sheer magnitude alone – leaving all the other arguments aside – demands at least an objective description.

Objectives

The present research is an attempt to provide an objective, factual perspective upon the discipline (as noted above) through a synthetic, comprehensive overview of its historical evolution as an academic field, with particular focus on the European and North American continents. Another objective of this work is to account for some of the most significant premises contributing to the actual form and status of comparatist theories. Its main purpose is not to arbitrate the multitude of trends and opinions trying to associate the term with a singular authoritative meaning and/or educational purpose, but rather to allow the reader a systematic perspective of the topic.

This study will need therefore to take into account several major features of the problem, which although intimately interrelated are as many distinct elements contributing to the devising and evolution of the term “comparative literature.” A first prerequisite would be a “working definition,” which would conciliate the variety of perspectives adopted by scholars of significant stature in the field. Another important aspect is the historical one: While in itself it might not concern directly the essence

of the matter (comparatist theories, literary studies) the historical perspective is nevertheless necessary for the correct understanding of today’s theoretical and administrative issues. It may also prove useful in the solving of some problems concerning the curricular organization of dedicated departments, their possible solutions, and their consequences.

Preliminary Concepts

The Subject Matter

"Comparative literature" can be (and often is) an extremely confusing term. Its constituents alone are prone to many controversies concerning their meaning. We will not even attempt to touch upon the possible understandings of "literary" – due to reasons all to easy to understand. For the sake of convenience, we will understand by "literary" manly texts deliberately written for an artistic purpose. However, the other element of the term deserves at least a brief examination, as is the possible cause for most controversies and critiques of our discipline. Essentially, "to compare" is the act of putting together two or more objects and revealing their resemblances and differences. On the other hand, *any* literary analysis is essentially the same. An analysis will necessarily attempt to define the subject of its inquiry, according to a randomly chosen set of criteria. Whether it is a description, critique or praise, the literary study will inherently state: this (novel, poem, play, article, movie, etc.) *is* something (good, bad, similar to, revolutionary). Accepting the evidence, we will have to identify *any* literary study with

some sort of definition. Yet how exactly does a definition work? By making use of a *genus proximus* and a specific difference. Thus, the conclusion: *every* literary study is necessarily “comparatist” to some extent, and any “comparatist approach” is actually no different from a “mere,” “simply literary” study.

The only *specific* area where comparative literature could claim originality is limited thus to the domain of the subjects studied. The criteria organizing those subjects will be, however, more or less arbitrary. Assuming (partly) the classical fundamentation of something called “comparative literature” upon concept as “nation” and “period” we could safely assume that the domain is in fact nothing more than the study of various instances of rhetoric, determined in time and space.

Historical Prerequisites

If we accept as “comparatist” any study entailing simultaneously aspects of philosophy, literature, visual arts and sociology (and the list could go on), the history of this specialty would have to begin with Aristotle’s works; he and many of his followers added to the time-honored European literary theory many a concept traceable

in contemporary studies. On the “administrative” side, the tradition dating back to the Middle Ages of teaching literature as part of the trivium, and the conjunction of the latter with the quadrivium also favored a global, “comparatist” perspective of literary works. Also, many critical texts, dating from before the nineteenth century (the generic period accepted for the birth of the concept) up until present days may be consistent with one or more criteria qualifying them as “comparatist.” However, as the discipline in its present form is relatively recent, the present study will thus focus mainly on texts expressly conceived as contributions to the development of “comparative literature” - whatever the particular meaning assigned by their author to the term. Historically, “the name of the game seemed to have been formed on the model of other nineteenth-century usages such as “comparative anatomy” or comparative linguistics,” in a kind of *pseudoscientific* claim [italics mine] that there was a comparative method that could be universally applied, to the production of acceptable results.[5]” However, the approach that established the discipline as an acknowledged

[5] Peter Brooks, “Must We Apologize?” in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995.

academic branch was eventually challenged in the second half of the twentieth century. René Wellek and other influential scholars following his example labeled it as “artificial and mechanistic.”

Ideological aspects as those mentioned above bring forward another topic of this study, the theoretical one. The rationales behind a form or another of “Comparative Criticism” are very diverse. From a “comparatist” vision of universal literature as a response to the canonical “Eurocentric” perspective to a means to contrast one minority’s particularities with the “mainstream” ideologies, the field proved to be a generous all-encompassing shelter to many a theory. A brief review of some of the most significant contributors to this diversity is not only useful but also necessary for a comprehensive overview. While the inherent act of comparison remained unchanged in almost two centuries, its ideological motivation, and the way in which it was accomplished has undergone several changes. These changes raise a set of questions for any researcher. Are the initial norms and methods completely obsolete or is the domain facing only a “cosmetic” rearrangement? Is there more than one way to compare two (or more) elements of a relationship? Or can be “comparison” replaced by something else? While not trying

to solve these questions itself, our study will try to find out if there are any answers on the contemporary comparatist scene. Finally, yet importantly, the practical educational purposes of Comparative Literature departments contributed to a significant degree to the “redefinition” or “reshaping” of the specialty during its history. A brief preview of the norms and regulations in existence within today’s academic environments could also be an informative factor for an accurate perspective upon the matter.

Finally, the (narrow) limits of this survey need to be further defined in order to fit its actual dimensions and purposes. Contemporary comparative studies require a perspective as objective and exhaustive as possible. Ideally, a “history” or an overview of the discipline would imply the extensive analysis of literary periods beginning at least with the ancient times, and including a considerable number of “exotic” cultures from all over the five continents (Indian, Islamic, and far East literatures in particular). The present examination tries to follow the evolution of “comparative literature” essentially as a term originated and developed by the European intellectual community from the Middle Ages until the modern period, inherited and brought to its actual form by scholars on both the Old and the New Continents.

Definitions

Comparative Literature is inherently a difficult term to define. The difficulty arises from the vast and uncertain territory the discipline is covering and from the already controversial nature of the two words constituting its name. The two (or more) elements of a comparison can be contained exclusively within the realm of literature, but some of them (not all) can also be part of another field of study. Moreover, each scholar has his own understanding of "literary" and "comparison," determining the final meaning of the concept. Our discipline never had a really unique, "standard" characterization. The most commonly accepted definitions evolved through time in function of the period's norms and practices, generally following the outline recommended by one of the most influential figures in the field. Here are, in chronological order, a few of these definitions as postulated by some of the most influential scholars in this domain:

Joseph Texte, 1898:

> L'étude comparative des littératures. Relations des diverses littératures entre elles, actions et réactions simultanées ou successives, influences

sociales, esthétiques ou morales qui dérivent du croisement des races et du libre échange des idées…

Oscar James Campbell, 1926:

> Comparative literature … endeavors, in the first place, to discover general laws which transcend any one literature, such as the development of types and forms under the progressive relationships of different literatures. In the second place, it seeks to reveal relations of affinity within two or more literatures. Finally, through the discovery of similarities and differences by means of comparison, it endeavors to explain the inception and growth of individual works. That is, like all scientific studies of literature, our methods are primarily investigations of the processes by which a work has come into being and appraisals of the forces which produced this result. In other words, the methods of comparative literature do not seek to produce or enhance aesthetic delight, but rather to create new models of understanding.

René Wellek and Austin Warren, 1942:

> Comparison is a method used by all criticism and sciences, and does not, in any way, adequately describe the specific procedures of literary study. The formal comparison between literatures – or even movements, figures and works – is rarely a central

theme in literary history […] in practice, the term “comparative” literature has covered and still covers rather distinct fields of study and groups of problems. It may mean, first, the study of oral literature, especially of folk-tale themes and their migration […] Another sense of “comparative” literature confines it to the study of relationships between two or more literatures. […] A third conception… identifies comparative literature with the study of literature in its totality, with “world-literature,” with “general” or “universal” literature.

Paul Van Tieghem, 1946:

L’objet de la littérature comparée … est essentiellement d’étudier les œuvres des diverses littératures dans leurs rapports les unes avec les autres. […] le caractère de la vraie littérature comparée, comme celui de toute science historique, est d’embrasser le plus grand nombre possible de faits différents d’origine, pour mieux expliquer chacun d’eux; d’élargir les bases de la connaissance a fin de trouver les causes du plus grand nombre possible d’effets. Bref, le mot comparé doit être vidé de toute valeur esthétique et recevoir une valeur historique ; et la constatation des analogies et des différences qu’offrent deux ou plusieurs livres, scènes, sujets ou pages de langue diverses, n’est que le point de départ

nécessaire qui permet de découvrir une influence, un emprunt, etc., et par suite d'expliquer partiellement une œuvre par une autre.

Henry Remak, 1971:

> Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences, (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression.

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1999:

> In principle, the discipline of Comparative Literature is in toto a method in the study of literature in at least two ways. First, Comparative Literatures means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature and second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings

> of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc. […] Comparative Literature has intrinsically a content and form, which facilitate the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and it has a history that substantiated this content and form. Predicated on the borrowing of methods from other disciplines and on the application of the appropriated method to areas of study single-language literary study more often than tends to neglect, the discipline is difficult to define because thus it is fragmented and pluralistic.

As the preceding paragraphs demonstrate, the concept has undergone a few ideological mutations from its beginnings until present times. Also, it becomes evident that no definition has managed to cover in a satisfactory manner all the aspects and theoretical details of this complex field called “comparative literature”. As Robert J. Clements states in his C*omparative Literature as an Academic Discipline*: “there is little that anyone at this late date can contribute to the realm of definition” [of this term, n. n.] Nevertheless, they are abundant, and while a few general principles appear to be ubiquitous, a singular, universally accepted explanation of the concept remains yet to be established.

A brief summary of the above definitions would have to point out several common elements as well as the essential differences between their perspectives. First, they all envision the relating of a limited literary domain (national literature, genres or trends) to a literary or non-literary factor, each of them including in some manner the ideas of its predecessor. The definition introduced by Texte conceives comparative literature as limited to the study of a factual/historical relationship between two national literatures, as caused by various social norms. Oscar J. Clements introduces another formal criteria of classification (innately related to comparison), that of "type" and "form." Paul Van Tieghem stresses the historicist approach, "le mot comparé doit être vidé de toute valeur esthétique et recevoir une valeur historique," the very factor challenged by Wellek, who shifts the weight of the investigation from content towards method for the profit of literariness, which should supersede "scientifism" in the discipline: "Comparison is a method used by all criticism and sciences, and does not, in any way, adequately describe the specific procedures of literary study." Henry Remak tries to update the concept including features imposed to comparative studies by the progress of modern knowledge, including in his definition

“other spheres of human expression.” Finally, Tötösy introduces the much more general term “the other,” in his attempt to re-establish the discipline upon new epistemological grounds. While it seems impossible at this time to find an exclusive, exhaustive definition conciliating all the principles previewed so far, the present study will adopt as a “working variant” the one suggested by Claude Pichois and André Rousseau:

> La littérature comparée est l’art méthodique, par la recherche de liens d’analogie, de parenté et d’influence, de rapprocher la littérature des autres domaines d’expression ou de la connaissance ou bien les faits et les textes littéraires entre eux, distants ou non dans le temps ou dans l’espace, pourvu qu’ils appartiennent à plusieurs langues ou plusieurs cultures, fissent-elles partie d’une même tradition, afin de mieux les décrire, les comprendre et les goûter.

Chronological Overview: The Evolution of the Concept

Antiquity and the Middle Age: Early Precursors

The act of comparing national literatures originated long before it was established as an academic domain, individual theoretical works and considerations emerging in several national literatures before "comparative literature" became an "institutionalized" discipline. Influential cultures as the Ancient Greek already imposed the comparison of their features on the artistic institutions of other civilizations. Early scholars wrote about Hellenistic and Babylonian literature (Berossos) or Hellenistic and Phoenician literature (Philon of Byblos). These early works may look closer to what we call today ethnographical research, rather than literary studies, according to contemporary standards. The resemblance between some comparative analyses and ethnographies remains manifest to our days, the "cultural" being the first of the three functions assigned to the term "comparative literature" by René Wellek and Austin Warren[6]. The

[6] René Wellek, Austin Warren: *Theory of Literature,* New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1942. Chapter V, "General, Comparative and National Literature," p. 38.

phenomenon is easily justified: the essential constitutive elements of early literatures were mainly myths, and similar themes are to be encountered under various forms throughout the known ancient world. Consequently, “Sargon breeds Moses, Moses breeds Karna, Karna makes Oedipus possible, and so on through the concatenation that Otto Rank established for us. Perseus and Andromeda evolve into Saint George and his rescued maiden. Horace, ‘the Greek little pig,’ bade Roman writers to leaf through Greek manuscripts by day and by night, urging those who liked Vergil to compare him to Homer, those who liked Plautus to measure him against Aristophanes[7].” Macrobius and Aulus Gellius were early comparatists, evaluating Roman poets with their Greek prototypes and analogues[8]. These writings were already a form of “comparative study,” although the authors may have not deliberately sought to confer them such a quality, nor to establish a specific scholastic method.

Many Middle Age authors continued the tradition inaugurated by their Greek and Roman predecessors. Classic works like those of Homer or Cicero were copied, imitated,

[7] Robert J. Clements, in *Comparative Literature as an Academic Discipline*, published by MLAA, 1978, pp. 2-3.

[8] To look for: Frank Chandler, in Yearbook of Comp. Lit. (66)

annotated, or interpreted, and the new writings allowed their comparison to the originals. However, at this time still, the various occurrences of comparative studies were rather accidental, than an established principle. It was not until the Renaissance period that this kind of work gained a proper form.

The Renaissance: First Occurrences of a New Worldview

One of the firsts to introduce a form of “comparative philology” in a work of academic consequence was Dante. His *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (c.1304-06) is a pioneering inquiry of linguistics and style pleading for the use of the vernacular in serious works of literature and for combining a number of Italian dialects to create a new national language. The comparative nature of the work is implicit, as are the subjects of several chapters: the description of several languages and their distinctive elements, based on morphologic criteria (book I, particularly chapter X); a defense of the poetry in vernacular, making use of references gathered from several literatures (book II). The imminent rises of scientific inquiry, of the individual and

national consciences[9] were to bring forth as well the discovery of the "other," the category of things extraneous to these consciences.

Pre-modern Approaches: the Enlightenment, Romanticism

This opposition between national and universal was also familiar to another historical movement continuing the progressive tradition of the Renaissance. The Enlightenment allowed the expression of considerations as the following, through the pen of one of its most influential figures, Voltaire, who practiced an empirical form of comparatism in some of his works (i.e. *Lettres philosophiques,* revealing the English literature to a rather isolated French public of the time), acknowledging that: "Presque tout est imitation… il en est des livres comme du feu de nos foyers; on va prendre ce feu chez son voisin, on l'allume chez soi, on le communique à d'autres et il appartient à tous." The cosmopolitism of the movement opened a new "relativist" perspective upon the world's literatures and cultures, reflected in nearly all the writings of its adepts and

[9] The essential traits of the Renaissance, according to Michelet and Burckhardt

followers. Lessing's literary and social perspectives illustrated in *Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend* or *The Freethinker*, or works as *The Persian Letters* of Montesquieu materialized this perspective in the realm of literature. The Sturm und Drang movement and its successor, Romanticism, inherited it and refined it in a systematic form. Friedrich von Schlegel's thought is crucial to the evolution of modern aesthetics, illustrated in studies ranged from classical antiquity to Asian studies and the philosophy of history and religion. Writings as *Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer* (History of the Poetry of the Greeks and Romans, 1798), *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Inder* (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians, 1808), or *Lectures on History and Literature* (1815) are as many landmarks in the evolution of (comparative) literary history, and implicitly, comparative literature. His brother, August Wilhelm, is also recognized as a most influential author and theoretician in the field, either directly, through his published lectures: *Vorlesungen über schöne Kunst und Literatur* (Lectures on the Fine Arts and Literature) and *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, or as an authority actively involved in the European intellectual scene. Within the domain of linguistics, using approaches complying with, if not defining the modern

scholarly standards, the comparative studies of Indo-European languages pioneered by the Grimm brothers founded norms still in use today. Herder, who is seen by some scholars as “the father of comparative literature,[10]” wrote in *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*: “Every man who didn’t learn to understand the world other than in the marketplace, the café or for the most part in *The Hamburg Correspondent*, is appalled in Paris by the arrival of an Indian prince, or when he opens a storybook and finds out that the climate, the region, the nationality change. He takes any foreign nation’s customs as a lunacy, and why? Because they have a different manner of thinking than his respectable mother, his commendable wet nurse or his venerable comrades.” Faithful to the principles of relativity and tolerance, his writings reflected critical and historical approaches open to new perceptions of the world. He wrote (or intended to write) a “History of song through the times” a “General history of poetry” or “A parallel between English and German poetry.” Joseph Texte identifies his work as the cornerstone of the forthcoming discipline: “Il posait en un mot, et du même coup, il

[10] Described as such or acknowledged as very influential by Posnett, Texte, Van Tieghem, Wellek, and others.

éclairait de toute la puissance de la philosophie, les principes de la littérature comparée. Il la constituait à l'état d'étude distincte, ambitieuse peut-être, difficile assurément, mais combien supérieure à la critique étroite et purement dogmatique d'un Voltaire ou même d'un Diderot ![11]" Another imposing figure of his time, Goethe, spoke about "Weltliteratur" as the result and the collection of national literatures, a universal entity to be considered in order to avoid nationalism and other prejudices.

The Modern Period

Although all the writings mentioned so far were of significant importance for the historical advance of our subject matter, one of the most vital and interesting periods of modern history was really the era leading to changes of prevalent importance for its evolution: the nineteenth century. This historic stage has special interest as the formative period from which many modern literary conditions and tendencies derived. Under the

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[11] Joseph Texte, in *Études de Littérature européenne* Paris: Armand Colin, editor, 1898, p. 19.

impact of the unprecedented technical development, Western society underwent profound transformations reflected also in the realms of philosophy and literature, being the ideal moment to confirm comparative literature as a substantial element on the academic scene.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a passionate Dutch traveler named Wilhelm de Clercq was publishing comparative literary studies issued by the cultural observations made during his journeys. In France, a scholar named François Noel published in 1816 a course book juxtaposing studies of French writing to Italian, Latin, or English counterparts, gathered under the name “Cours de littérature comparée.”

However, it was Abel-François Villemain, professor at Sorbonne, who was the first to offer an academic course of full academic stature bearing the same title in the summer of 1828. Its declared purpose was to demonstrate “through a comparative panorama the things gathered by the French spirit from foreign literatures, and those it offered in return.” The course was continued in 1829 and published thereafter. The subject matter of the several studies contained concern mainly the reciprocal impact between French and English literatures, as well as the French influence upon Italian writings during the 18th century. The

author disregarded German literature, mostly because he was unable to access directly its writings (he could not speak German), confining himself to mentioning the contributions of Mme de Staël on the subject as an adequate complement to his own. Although the opening towards foreign cultures and a universal perspective upon the development of literary history is a significant ideological evolution in the domain of literary criticism, “universal” is more often than not identified with “European,” and even this concept was meant to include only a few “major” literatures - an assumption which would remain unchanged until much later. Within this frame, the “Editor’s Foreword” opening the second volume notes that the eighteenth century trends favored “this comparative study of literatures, which is the philosophy of literary critique,” perhaps the first theoretical motivation for such an approach. Villemain continued his courses and their publishing until 1838-1840.

In 1830, Jean-Jacques Ampère (the son of the renowned physicist) presented at Marseille a dissertation about Nordic Poetry, from the Eddas to Shakespeare. This was the result of an older, ambitious project of his to study “the comparative literature of all poetry” dating from 1826, and later materialized in “*De l’histoire de la poésie,*” (1830) a text displaying a prominent influence of the

"scientificism" of the period. Ampère was perhaps the first to trace an analogy between the comparative method in natural sciences and literature: "We have to establish here, among the objects we classify, just like in botanic or zoology, not arbitrary divisions, but natural series and families.[12]" His coursework was conducted under the principle that if literature is a science, it has to belong to history and philosophy, because it is yet premature to focus on a philosophy of literature and arts studying the nature of beauty. Consequently, "The philosophy of the Arts and Literature has to be issued from their comparative history." The success of the inquiry brought its author to the Sorbonne, where he continued to advocate the necessity for the objectivity of literary studies in a manner much influenced by his liberal principles: "Literary history would be incomplete without the comparative studies; and if during these studies we shall find that a foreign literature was influential upon ours, we shall admit it, equitably proclaiming this benefit; we are too plentiful in glory to need that of others, and to proud to be unjust."

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[12] Jean-Jacques Ampère, in his inaugural discourse at the Marseille Athenaeum in 1830, cited by Simon Jeune, in *Littérature Générale et Littérature Comparée,* Paris: Minard, 1968, p. 34.

The effects of Ampère's works found an echo in the French literary world. Sainte-Beuve credits him as the sole founder of "comparative literary history" in his articles published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*[13]. However, these articles ignore not only the already mentioned efforts of Villemain, but also those of Philarète Chasles, another renowned French philologist, (according to the nomenclature of the time) whose works focused either specifically or in general terms on comparative studies. Many of his titles were pioneering works in the field *Études sur l'antiquité, précédées d'un essai sur les phases de l'histoire littéraire et sur les influences intellectuelles des races; Études sur W. Shakespeare, Marie Stuart, et L'Arétin; le drame, les mœurs et la religion au XVIe siècle*, and most remarkably, his coursework at the Collège de France, entitled "Questions du temps et problèmes d'autrefois. Pensées sur l'histoire, la vie sociale, la littérature.[14]"

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[13] The first in the edition of February 15, 1840, followed by another, almost three decades later, in September 1868.

[14] Other titles denoting his comparatist (and unusually modern and objective, for its time) perspective are: *Études sur la littérature et les mœurs de l'Angleterre au XIXe siècle*, *Études sur l'Allemagne, ancienne et moderne*, *Études sur les hommes et les mœurs au XIXe siècle*, *Un examen historique des biographes et historiens d'Olivier Cromwell*,

All these works were founded on Chasle's belief that literature, philosophy and society evolve in a close interdependence during their history, aiming to construct a general image of the human thought where all the nations reciprocally influence each other on a global scale.

If the French literary scene was understandably prolific, due to the effervescence of cultural life at that period, other European nations were also making rapid progress, even though on a smaller scale. In Switzerland, Joseph Hornung presented a course in Comparative Literature at the Academy of Lausanne in 1850. In Geneva, a similar course was offered beginning in 1858 by Albert Richard, within the chair of modern literature. Eventually the course generated a chair of its own, called "modern comparative literature," which survived until 1895. Germany continued the tradition of "cosmopolite" literary studies inaugurated by Schlegel, Herder, and Goethe and in 1854, Moriz Carrière published "*Das wesen und die Formen der Poesie,*" where the first occurrence of the coinage "Vergleichende Literaturgeschichte" (the German

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etc. He was also one of the firsts to show interest for the then relatively ignored American culture (*Études sur la littérature et les moeurs des Anglo-Américains au XIXe siècle*).

denomination for Comparative Literature) is to be found[15]. Carrière's main intention was to integrate comparative literature and the history of civilization within a single field of study, an idea illustrated in his later work and in the courses he gave at the University of Munich. He was not the only German scholar preoccupied by such undertakings. Another notable work dating from the same period belongs to Theodor Süpfle, whose *Geschichte des deutschen Kultureinflusses auf Frankreich mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der litterarischen Einwirkung* was considered a reference work in the field[16]. The large domain of inquiry allowed by "comparative literature" suited well the exploration of various literary themes and motifs preferred by German literates under the appellation "stoffgeschichte."

In England, at the middle of the century, Matthew Arnold was aware of the comparatist perspectives cultivated on the French literary setting. He embraced some of their ideas, and was the first to translate the term "littérature

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[15] Cf. Baldensperger, cited by René Wellek and Austin Warren, in *Theory of Literature,* chapter V, "General, Comparative and National Literature", New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942, p. 38.

[16] Cf. Claude Pichois, La Littérature Comparée, Paris : Armand Colin, éditeur, 1967, p.20.

comparée” into English, according to his belief that “the English literary critic must know literatures other than his own and be in touch with European standards.” The foreign influences were to be noticeable in his later critical work, guided by the principle that modern criticism should be "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world, and thus to establish a current of fresh and true ideas.[17]" The modern critical spirit was to consider not solely "literature" as an independent object of study but theology, history, art, science, sociology, and politics as well, in order "to see the object as in itself it really is." Another remarkable work preparing the background for the studies to come is Henry Hallam’s *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.* At this stage, and for a considerable amount of time later on, “comparative literature” was still conceived as a branch of or closely related to “comparative literary history.”

The other European countries were also trying to keep the pace with a transforming world of literature. In Italy,

[17] Matthew Arnold, in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *Essays in Criticism* (First Series, London, Cambridge, Macmillan and co., 1865.)

Francesco de Sanctis also presented a course in comparative literature in Naples. The exceptional cultural diversity of Central Europe was also a profitable ground for the development of humanistic (social, historical, literary) comparative studies of any kind. Professor Hugo Meltzl founded in collaboration with Samuel Brassai in 1877 a *Journal of Comparative Literature* at the university of Klausenburg (Kolozsvàr, Cluj,) published in six, then ten languages, and replaced in 1882 until 1888 by *Acta comparationis litterarum universarum.* By this time, the domain was already gaining recognition in the academic world. It only needed to define its standards in order to acquire universal acceptance.

Towards a Status of Academic Autonomy

The year 1886 was to bring about two events considered as crucial for the history of comparative literature: the publication of the German *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Literaturgeschichte* under the direction of Max Koch, which included in its first number a foreword-manifesto trying to delineate a number of principles of study. Most importantly, the same year witnessed the publication of a

book named “Comparative Literature[18]” by Hutchenson Macaulay Posnett, considered today by many scholars as the foundational work for the studies gathered under the same name during the following century.

The tome is published as “Volume LIV of The International Scientific Series,” among other titles such as “The History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science”, “The Life and Growth of the Language”, “Myth and Science” or “The Common Sense of the Exact Sciences”. Such titles illustrate the influence of the unprecedented progress in all the areas of the human thought (whether or not claiming a scientific status) upon their respective academic domains at the end of the century. Consequently, an essential feature of Posnett’s enterprise is “To assume a position on the border-lands of Science and literature” trying to conciliate two traditionally opposed perspectives. The author intends his volume to be a contribution to the “rational study of Literature” in “an effort … to treat Literature as something of higher import to man than elegant dilettantism…” The book makes therefore use of a technical tone and of the structure of a manual.

[18] “Comparative Literature” by Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett (author of “The Historical Method”); New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886

The subject matter is defined in the manner of a scientific approach, the following chapters describing and analyzing as separate entities “Clan literature,” “The city commonwealth,” the “World” and “National” literatures. The claimed “scientific” approach is strongly associated (if not identified) with “the historical approach,” the author pleading for a definition of “Comparative Literature” as a “Comparative Literary History,” closely related or even encompassed within the academic domain of history. “Nothing but historical reflection can restore the real order of development out of this chaos; [of non-scientifically organized literary matter] and historical reflection, as a work of science [italics mine] is only the tardy product of the present century.”

At the same time, the work introduces terms and ideas that anticipate the comparative study of literature according to the norms in use today. The definition of the subject matter is attempted at a universal scale. Posnett sees “Literature” as a constantly evolving phenomenon intimately related to the social dimension of the human existence from Ancient Greece to Chinese literature to the French and English literatures of the nineteenth century. He notes the fact that attempts to compare Homer to Vergil or Demosthenes to Cicero are hardly new within the literary

realm. The ancient scholars have studied the influence of Greek sources upon the Latin authors since the Roman Empire, and such texts re-occurred in all literatures until the present day. The novelty in his kind of approach is the systematization of the comparison raised to the status of scientific norm, which is to become the fundamental constitutive element of the "science" he tried to define. Also, using principles admirably ahead of his time (1886) such as "objectivity," "decentralization," "relativity [of opposing perspectives]," etc. which were commonly adopted by his fellow comparatists only much later in the twentieth century, he dedicates entire chapters to the study of "World Literature in India and China" or to the "Relativity of Literature." Probably the main significance of this momentous publication consists not as much in the bibliographical contribution it brings, but in the innovative perspectives it opened within the discipline.

Another scholar whose work was to be influential for generations of (French) comparatists to come was the editor of the celebrated *Revue des Deux Mondes,* Ferdinand Brunetière, who "dedicated his combative ardour to the proliferation of ideas favouring the cause of comparative

literature[19]" in his articles and particularly in the courses he held at the École Normale. The main attribute of comparative literature, was according to his vision "Being an instrument to constantly relate the five great literatures of modern Europe." He instituted a tradition honored and continued by the most distinguished French comparatists: Joseph Texte, Louis-Paul Betz, Ferdinand Baldensperger and others, the chronological list continuing until (but not ending with) Paul Van Tieghem.

The first among the most important of Brunetière's successors was Joseph Texte, author of another reference text quoted in almost all studies of Comparative Literature history, namely "*Études de Littérature Européenne.*" The volume was (and still is today) considered as a main source for research within the field. However, the tackling of the subject matter and the attitude of the author during this process does not necessarily progress from Posnett's work. The latter's objective, universal perspective upon the realm of literature is (re) replaced by a strongly Eurocentric view. The matter of the book (except perhaps for the introduction) confines itself to the study of

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[19] Paul Van Tieghem, in *La Littérature Comparée*, Paris: Armand Colin, editor, 1946, p. 34.

various instances of literary influence between French, English, German and Italian authors. The respective analyses do not attempt to surpass this limited condition, nor does the author intend to extend his inquiries on a universal scale. This attitude is understandable considering the European academic environment at the time, especially within a discipline, which was yet trying to define its limits and objectives. The questions concerning the “major” works and literatures, commonly known at the time, had to be answered before any attempt to include details concerning either “exotic” elements (i.e. Asian poetry) or countries whose productions still awaited universal recognition (such as Norway, Poland, or many others).

Similarly to Posnett’s publication, this book is rather remarkable due to several “firsts” in the methodology of the critique, which remained either as points of future reference or even principles inherited by contemporary scholars. Perhaps the best known of these “firsts” is the deliberate attempt to define “Comparative Literature” as a scientific field by analogy with (among others) the natural sciences. Although Posnett already made this association, Texte’s explanation is thorough, systematic and most of all, meticulously documented. The

following argument describes the motivation leading to the denomination of the discipline, cited in every study including the two words in its title:

“Si les littératures peuvent se comparer, dans une certaine mesure, aux espèces animales par la nature de leur évolution, il faut donc les étudier par une méthode appropriée, assez délicate et assez pénétrante pour expliquer la complexité des faits auxquels on l’applique. Et cette méthode ne peut être, comme toute méthode vraiment scientifique, que la méthode comparative, celle-là même qui constitue le lien commun entre les sciences aussi éloignées que l’anatomie et la grammaire, la zoologie et la linguistique, la paléontologie et la science des religions.[20]” The principle was “borrowed” from biology, based on the consideration that a literature or a nation is developing similarly to an animal organism, in a strict interrelation with the other organisms, that is to say, the neighboring countries and civilizations. And since the study of a live animal is mostly the study of the relations it develops between itself and the environment “like an invisible network”, every literature, and possibly every

[20] Joseph Texte, in Études de Littérature Européenne, Paris: Armand Colin, editor, 1898, pp. 17-18

writer has a history reaching beyond the borders of its country. The acceptance of such a setting would lead to the necessity of a comparative study of every literature. These theoretical considerations are also supported by practical details and examples, another “first” of this work being the postulation of a few principles concerning the required abilities of a comparatist (namely, the knowledge of several languages, a vast knowledge of the literatures whose works are analyzed, and the necessity of the discipline to keep the pace with the ever-evolving scientific theories. Texte’s groundbreaking contribution issues expectedly the recognition later scholars such as Van Tieghem gave him: “On voit que Texte peut être considéré à juste titre comme le premier en France, et l’un des premiers en Europe, qui se soit fait un spécialiste attitré de cette discipline.”

Another successor of Brunetière was Louis-Paul Betz, (a close friend and collaborator of Texte, whose fate seemed to be bound to the study of the cultural interactions: born in New York from German parents, student and later professor at Zürich.) He gathered his domain-related work in a collection named “*La Littérature Comparée*” and published in 1902. The most important contribution to the developing field was the attempt to

organize and document materials contributing to its growth, compiling and organizing the resources and articles published up-to-date in a “Bibliographical Essay” printed in 1897. The work was setting the grounds for a bibliography which was to be developed later by Baldensperger (among others), including materials from the most various sources: books printed in numerous languages and countries, articles contained in periodicals more or less well-known by the general public, or even publications hard if not impossible to find by the possibly interested researcher[21].

The last among the works that need to be mentioned from the same period - the turn of the twentieth century, which brought significant changes and innovations to the discipline - is yet another reference recurring in most of the studies concerning the history of comparative literature: Frédéric Loliée’s *“A Short History of Comparative Literature from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*.” While chronologically it was published after the other books presented here, it is the most distant from the contemporary meaning of “comparative literature.” The

[21] Louis-Paul Betz, *La Littérature Comparée. Essai bibliographique.* F. Baldensperger, editor, Strasbourg: Trübner, 1904.

book is really an impressive academic effort within the realm of literature, but its comparative side derives rather from its exhaustive dimensions than from the ideas behind it. It is essentially a history of literature (mostly European), which by the sheer amount of covered information becomes "comparative literature." The author's understanding of the notion and of the task he is undertaking is that of a historiography encompassing all the available knowledge of that time about the world's cultures, their social settings and literary productions. The motivation for this work (and also the ideology behind it) is presented in its preface: "Can we grasp the notion of a world-wide civilization, founded on the mutual respect of different nations, and on the diffusion of those ideas and feelings which are at once its consequences, its consecration, and its guarantee?[22]" The book is above all an ultimate instrument for the general study of world literature.

While the discipline was evolving ever faster at the turn of the century, some countries were already establishing a tradition in the study of comparative

[22] M. Gréard, in the preface to "A Short History of Comparative Literature," Kennikat Press: Port Washington, 1970

literature (Baldensperger was to continue the Betz's unfinished bibliography, *Studien zur Vergleichende Literaturgeschichte* followed the *Zeitschrift* with the same title), other countries were taking their own academic initiative within the field: In Russia, one of the first comparatists was Alexander Veslovski, who in an effort foregoing perhaps the formalist movement (he was also a folklorist) tried to organize the comparative literary studies in a rigorously organized science, synthesizing general rules based on particular observations.

The United States became early aware of the intellectual concerns of the old continent and readily adopted the new discipline. A first chair of Comparative Literature was created at Columbia University in 1899, followed by another at Harvard, five years later, and yet another at Dartmouth in 1908. Also at Columbia a collection was inaugurated called first "The Comparative Literature Library" and renamed after 1912 "Studies in English and Comparative Literature." George Woodberry founded at the same university the first *Journal of Comparative Literature*, although short-lived. Nevertheless, the concept was gaining ground as a fertile and pragmatic approach, determined by the same "scientific" approach called upon by nineteenth century scholars. William Morton Payne was

pleading in the favor of the comparative approach with an argument differing from the one used by Texte only by the examples used: “The study of literature in the evolutionary sense tends more and more to become a comparative study. Just as the geological series of deposits, confused or abruptly broken off in one country, may be continued elsewhere, so some line of development among the *genres* of literature, clear up to a certain point in the product of one nation, may from that point on be better traced by transferring the scrutiny to some other field.” American literary scholars adopted the new discipline with an enthusiasm that was to bring its status and acknowledgement beyond the simple acceptance it witnessed on the old continent. Perhaps due to its relatively detached position, the intellectuality of the new world found the call for a “universal” and objective perspective more suitable for the needs of a world about to suffer a profound shift from its traditional Eurocentric organization. Comparative Literature was ready by this time to become a universal issue.

One of the most prominent figures that contributed to the success of the discipline in gaining such a status was Ferdinand Baldensperger. He continued the pioneering works of both Texte and Betz, filling the position of professor

at the chair of Comparative Literature in Lyon left vacant by the first and continuing the bibliography left unfinished by the other. The latter enterprise materialized in an influential reference work still used by today's scholars. His *Études d'histoire Littéraire* (1907-1939) are an example of meticulous comparative work about European literary influences. The chair at Sorbonne where he professed since 1910 became perhaps the most important center of research and academic initiative within the field during his lifetime. The publications and series he founded (partly in collaboration with Paul Hazard): *Revue de littérature comparée* and its *Bibliothèque,* or *Études de littérature étrangère et comparée* collected and illustrated the majority of the works, ideas and researches of the discipline. In the same category of notable publication is yet another collection of essays he edited, *Mélanges d'histoire littéraire et comparée*, mentioned by Van Tieghem as "historical," and "the first publication dedicated exclusively to Comparative Literature studies.[23]" Similarly to Baldensperger, most of the scholars beginning their comparatist activity during the first decades of the

[23] Paul Van Tieghem, op. cit., p. 49.

twentieth century extended their work and influence until the present times.

Apart from the cultural events related to one (or more) of the personalities mentioned above, the academic field continued the progress (although at an inconsistent pace) brought by the new century. In France, the already existing chairs of Comparative Literature (at Sorbonne and at Lyon) were followed by others at Strasbourg (1919), at the Collège de France (1925) and at Lille (1930). A *Revue Latine / Journal de littérature comparée* appeared under the direction of Émile Faguet between 1902 and 1908. In the United States, other new departments were created after those of Columbia and Harvard: in North Carolina (1923), and California (1925) as a result of the enthusiastic work of the same Baldensperger, and in Wisconsin in 1927.

Early Twentieth Century

In 1926, Oscar James Campbell tried to find an answer to the question "What is Comparative Literature?[24]" for the students of the newly created departments, based on the

[24] Oscar James Campbell, "What is Comparative Literature?" In *Essays in Memory of Barrett Wendell,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926, pp. 23-40.

premises launched by Posnett and Texte. It was also introducing new perspectives inherent to American culture, with a methodology more detached from Texte's Eurocentric thinking and Posnett's historiographic inquiry, adapted to the needs of the academic life on the New Continent. His innovative approach materialized in the equal consideration of all the national cultural factors contributing to the global image of literary history (unlike the works of Texte and his colleagues, stressing a primordially the French culture and influence), and one of the first attempts to integrate American writings and theories in the elements of comparison constituting the subject matter. (Among the most commonly mentioned names are those of George Kittredge and Francis Gummere). Other scholars, like Irving Babbitt, were also taking part in the effort to establish the grounds of the discipline with referential works such as *"Masters of French Criticism"* (1913), *"Rousseau and Romanticism"* (1919) or *Spanish Character and other essays* (1940). These instances were to be only the precursors of an important and influential afflux of studies from this country, which followed in the second half of the century.

Significant Institutions and Publications

The international academic community became soon aware of the recent progresses made, and of the need for an organism keeping account of the multitude of articles, researches and other publications contributing to the growth of the field. Under the initiative and supervision of Paul Van Tieghem, such an institution was created in 1928, in Oslo, during the works of the Congress of Historical Sciences. This early precursor of the ICLA was still tributary to the historicist perspective defining the domain. It was called “The International Committee of Modern Literary History.” The rather short-lived organization held congresses at Budapest, Lyon and Amsterdam between 1931 and 1939, but most importantly engendered another reference publication, *The Chronological Repertoire of Modern Literatures*. During the first half of the century, the phenomenon was gaining on a global scale more and more the status of an academic discipline, instead of a secondary, almost incidental matter. It had most (if not all) of the instruments and resources required for such a status: synchronic and diachronic critical accounts of national and international literary exchanges, of interactions and influences, a functional (although ever

unstable) framework of definitions, methods and categories, important centers of activity, publications, and sufficient personalities of imposing academic stature to sustain its cause. However, the major changes the Second World War was to bring in the existence of humanity equally affected the domain of comparative literature, which was to suffer significant adjustments caused by the social, cultural and even political shifts in the post-war world.

Post-War Era: Expansion and Crises

These shifts were materialized in what Claude Pichois called “the extraordinary expansion of the field following its rather slow maturation[25]” The multitude of works illustrating this expansion were a natural continuation of the premises and ideas developed during the first half of the century, most of them (at least during the post-war period) being the creations of scholars whose activities originated from the same period. The writings of Paul Van Tieghem, René Wellek or Werner Friederich published in the forties, fifties and even early sixties were in fact the coronation of a sustained work whose origins can be traced

[25] Claude Pichois, op. cit., p. 25.

as early as the first decades of the century. While the discipline was becoming increasingly popular on a global scale, its expansion followed different patterns in each country, according to the various factors of influence mentioned above. Countries that had little or no interest in comparative studies before the Second World War began to take an active part in the development of the discipline. Two of the most representative of such cases are Japan and the Netherlands. The first founded its National Society of Comparative Literature in 1948, followed by the Institute for Comparative Literature (at Tokyo university) in 1953. The latter followed a similar pattern, inaugurating in 1948 at Utrecht the “Institute for Comparative Literary Sciences” and an Institute of General Literature in 1962. The efforts of both these nations produced some of the most acknowledged research centers within their discipline and geographical area.

The cultures with an already established tradition in the study of general and comparative literature continued to build on the foundations provided by the pioneers of the field, although the term gained slightly different connotations in each particular instance. The European academic scene continued to conceive comparative literature as an interdisciplinary (or even “over” disciplinary) means

for the study of literature from a global perspective, probably best described by André Rousseau and Claude Pichois as “a vast and diverse reflection of the inquisitive spirit, of the taste for synthesis and opening towards any kind of literary phenomenon, no matter its time or place of occurrence.” However, while the very general frame of the definition is open towards the new tendencies and ideas occurring in the modern literate world, it is not really an alteration of the “classic,” historical concept of the comparative method. This definition falls short from setting the grounds of a modern discipline where all the modern incidences of “comparative literature” would find their proper place (literature and film, literature and music, etc.) [The European scholarly studies remain faithfully within the old domain of philology, regardless their updated denomination.]

The United States academic environment had a somewhat different conception about the discipline, issued partly from its relative detachment from its European counterpart, and partly from the concerns of pragmatic nature encountered by the universities and chairs having a program in comparative literature. The initial motivations and goals of these departments, acknowledged as “the common inheritance of American comparatists” by Thomas Greene

were: "… a new internationalism … broader perspectives on works and authors, a European grasp of historical movements, larger contexts in the tracking of motifs, themes and types as well as larger understandings of genres and modes … the clarification of the great theoretical issues of literary criticism from a cosmopolitan vantage point. […] Beyond even these boundaries, the Comparative Literature movement wanted to explore the relationships of literature with the other arts and humanities: with philosophy, history, history of ideas, linguistics, music, art, and folklore among others.[26]"

The common element behind all these goals and principles was "the urgent need […] before our subject goes to thinly spread […] for a set of minimal standards[27]" organizing the extremely vast amount of matters encompassed in such a discipline. The task was (and remained) extremely difficult, requiring, as Paul Van Tieghem observed, "a

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[26] The "Report on Standards to the American Comparative Literature Association," 1975 (the Greene report) in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Charles Bernheimer, editor. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995.

[27] Harry Levin in the "Report on Standards to the American Comparative Literature Association," 1975, cited in the same source as above.

sizeable and precise erudition … encountered only in great scholars.” One such scholar was the one who is considered by many to be the real and undisputed “father” of modern comparative studies, René Wellek. Its fundamental work, written in collaboration with Austin Warren, the *Theory of Literature* is among the first defining Comparative Literature in its versatile, contemporary context, as well as one of the first studies signaling and trying to answer the problems arising in the systematization of the discipline[28]. The most important among these was issued by the old, “classic” acceptation of the term based on the nineteenth century “comparative-scientific” approach “confining comparative literature to the study of relationships between two or more literatures.” His conclusion, further explained in “*The Crisis of Comparative Literature*” was that “No distinct system can, it seems, emerge from the accumulation of such studies.[29]” Ironically, although this major flaw of the discipline was the first to

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[28] René Wellek and Austin Warren: *Theory of Literature,* New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1942. Chapter V, “General, Comparative and National Literature” – probably the first attempt to define “Comparative Literature” in concordance with contemporary facts and norms within the domain of literary studies.

[29] Op. cit, p. 40.

be unveiled, it remained its most important unanswered methodological question until present days. Some scholars tried to solve the riddle with more or less success, while others ignored it altogether, continuing to produce comparative studies (many of special quality and interest) being less concerned about the exact boundaries or possible limitations of their inquiries.

The European post-war setting was marked during the same period by the publication of another two influential books. The first, continuing the spirit and tradition inaugurated by Betz and Baldensperger was Paul Van Tieghem's *La Littérature comparée*, an erudite writing compiling a complete preview of the discipline's historical evolution, achievements and methods, with some of its most important issues at the time. However, the author's approach and the matters covered by his work were to prove soon insufficient to keep the pace with the evolution of the field. The second book, published in 1951 by Marius-François Guyard tried to overcome this problem, the book called also "*La Littérature comparée*" being conceived as "initiation source" for those interested by the subject – apparently an ever increasing public, constituted not only by a little group of highly specialized researchers, but by more and more students at both undergraduate and graduate

levels. By the mid-sixties, their numbers were already considerable. In France, fifteen thousand students were auditing during the 1967 academic year one form or another of Comparative Literature course. The United States had during the same period eighty departments enlisted as or offering courses in “Comparative Literature.” This “explosion” was also reflected in the number of congresses [and publications] dedicated to the speciality: The ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association) inaugurated in 1955 in Venice its existence as well as its first congress. Others will follow regularly every three years. A French Association of Comparative Literature was founded in 1954, followed by its American counterpart in 1960. Most of the European countries followed their example.

Considering the matters of mainly pragmatic nature mentioned above (programmatic and curriculum issues, administrative and organizational problems) the American academic environment focused its efforts on the standardization of the various programs functioning under the general denomination of “comparative literature.” The ACLA mandated its members to submit a “Report on Standards” for every decade of its activities, beginning with 1965. These reports, known largely by the names of the chairman

of its redactional committee (Levin, Greene, Bernheimer) were reference documents reflecting each the status of the discipline, its concerns and perspectives at the time. The aspects covered were various: from theoretical issues (the methodology, the subject matter and its relations with other domains) to - most importantly - educational and administrative aspects. The influence of these reports on standards was crucial, most of the Comp Lit departments in the United States structuring their program and curriculum based on their indications, until present times. Among the most significant contributions of these reports to the development of our discipline there two deserving a particular highlight. The first regards the opening of a new perspective on what was until recently considered a purely "literary" domain: the interaction of literature with other art forms: "We need to consider here the relevance of other than literary disciplines: notably linguistics, folklore, art, music, history, philosophy, and possibly psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Our rigor in defining our own position should help us to clarify our interdisciplinary relationships.[30]" The second ground-

[30] The "Report on Standards to the American Comparative Literature Association," 1965 (the Levin report) in *Comparative Literature in the*

breaking contribution was the particular attention accorded to most of the administrative problems affecting the existence and functionality of the academic chairs. The reports were among the first documents trying to offer realistic solutions to the structure and number of the courses indispensable for a comparative literature department or the selection and training of the students.

The European institutions were facing similar problems, reflected in the documents presented at international conferences (Utrecht, 1961; Fribourg, 1964, Beograd, 1967). However, an aspect conferring a particular distinction to the comparatist community during that period was generated by a new factor influencing nearly all aspects of social life on the continent: politics, namely the ideological issues generated by the Cold War. This interaction between academic research and political dogmas is illustrated by the documents of the International Congress of Comparative Literature held at Budapest in 1962, and in René Etiemble's publication, *Comparaison n'est pas raison*, based on his own lecture held at the same congress. The dispute was generated by the communist theory

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Age of Multiculturalism, Charles Bernheimer, editor. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995.

identifying “comparatism” with “cosmopolitanism,” an essential trait of bourgeois society, a term incompatible with the isolationism professed by communist ideology. A paradoxical situation was reached, where this arbitrary limitation of a domain essentially linked to the concept of universality had to be rejected (by René Étiemble) with the arguments of the very patron of the socialist dogma, Karl Marx.

These ephemeral frictions were soon surpassed, however, and the scholars re-focused their attention on more founded subjects of inquiry. The late sixties and the seventies was the period witnessing the creation of the majority of the important contributions to the development of the discipline. Virtually all of them try to solve the difficult problem of defining the subject-matter of a domain interdisciplinary par excellence. René Étiemble, *Comparaison n’est pas raison, 1963*; Claude Pichois, *La littérature comparée,* 1967; Ulrich Weisstein, *Einführung in die Verglechende Litteraturwissenschaft, 1968*; Owen Aldridge, *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method,* 1969. The list could go on, the works of authors as Guillen, Corstius, Remak or Block being as many necessary reference points in any comparative literature bibliography. However, none of them succeeded in imposing a unique framework for

this very controversial field, and no publication did so up-to-date.

The American academia seemed to be the most productive regarding the number of studies concerning the domain, either in form of books or periodicals. The phenomenon was evident during the eighties, consequently to the publication to the second *Report on Standards* of the ACLA. However, as stated in the third such *Report*, the studies seemed to reach a crisis point, due to the lack of unity in the theoretical principles underlying them. The previous acceptation of the term as innately and strictly confined to literary theory was being challenged by perspectives borrowed from other domains: sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies. The departments and programs begun to be seen as “accessories” to “classic,” national languages and literatures chairs. The discipline was less and less regarded as significant, due to the lack of theoretical, scientifically founded principles.

Present Status and Possible Perspectives

The decaying *status quo* of the domain during the last two decades was synthesized by Susan Bassnett, in her *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*: "Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead". Comparative Literature in the traditional centres -- France, Germany, the United States -- is undergoing both intellectual and institutional changes and a certain loss of position owing to factors such as the takeover of theory by English, the impact of cultural studies, the diminishing number of Comparative Literature professorships, etc., this loss of presence is occurring in the centres of the discipline and with regard to its own natural context of Eurocentrism and Euro-American centre.

This decline of the discipline could be explained by its shifting from an organized, particular method of studying literature (and related fields) operating in a well-defined framework and having all the benefits of a highly regarded academic subject towards the status of a phenomenon more like a syndrome, whose instances can be occasionally grouped under the same denomination, if needed, but without a set of well-determined criteria prerequisite for a “serious” classification. In a situation

similar to the one experienced during the nineteenth century, comparative literature needed to redefine itself as an approach emulating (if not assuming) the characteristics of a science. However, learning from previous mistakes, this new approach had to extend beyond the mere “accumulation of facts” criticized by Wellek, and add to its fundament a set of operative principles and methods withstanding a confrontation with theoretical interrogations. Such an attempt to solving this challenge was undertaken by Steven Totosy, a Hungarian-Canadian scholar who initiated in 1995 a series of publications and activities dedicated to the revival of “Comparative Literature,” through its redefinition upon a completely new set of rationale. In order to re-confer comparative literature its lost “scientific” status, this distinguished professor tries to found the principles of the discipline on a completely new set of theories, based on “The Ten Principles of Comparative Literature” and “The Scientific and Methodological Approach.” His theories offer the tempting alternative of redefining the field on a completely independent theoretical basis, structured upon new principles. While the trend seems to offer the most interesting and viable alternative to every contemporary

theory, it will have to prove its vitality with a yet hesitant and disappointed public.

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Vita

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